

# **A is for Anarchy, V is for Vendetta: Images of Guy Fawkes and the Creation of Postmodern Anarchism**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Although the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 failed at the level of conventional political action, it had a profound impact on Anglo-American political culture. The Plot added the face of Guy Fawkes to our political iconography, and introduced the word ‘guy’ into the English language. This paper argues that the face of Fawkes and the word ‘guy’ have become what post-structuralists call ‘free floating signifiers.’ Liberated from all permanent meaning, this image and this word have become potent instruments for the promotion of postmodern anarchism. The comic book *V for Vendetta* (Alan Moore and David Lloyd, 1981) makes very effective use of these instruments. This book uses the image of Guy Fawkes to initiate a powerful anarchist critique of fascism. The book experiments with postmodern symbolism, but its version of anarchism remains mainly modern. However, the film version of *V for Vendetta* (dir. James McTeigue, screenplay by the Wachowski Brothers, 2006) articulates a full-blown postmodern anarchism. This film has been widely criticised, but critics overlook the film’s valuable contributions. In the film, the face of Fawkes provides the basis for sophisticated representations of sexuality, mass media systems and anarchist political action. Through its visual iconography, the film thus provides mainstream cinema audiences with an effective introduction to the symbolic vocabulary of postmodern anarchism.

*Remember, remember  
The Fifth of November  
The Gunpowder Treason and Plot  
I know of no reason  
Why Gunpowder Treason  
Should ever be forgot*

—Traditional, circa 17th century

About four centuries ago, a group of radical Catholic dissidents attempted to assassinate James Stuart, the Scottish king who had recently taken the English crown following the death of Elizabeth I. The conspirators planned to detonate a large quantity of gunpowder beneath the Palace of Westminster during the opening session of Parliament in 1605. Had it succeeded, the Gunpowder Plot would have killed not only King James VI

of Scotland, I of England, but also the assembled Lords and Commons. This would have effectively decapitated the nascent British state which the pro-Union James was so ardently pursuing. Of course, the Plot was discovered and foiled, the King and his Parliament were saved, and the kingdoms of England and Scotland were eventually united.

Yet this pleasant textbook historiography does not begin to address the real significance of the Plot. In practical terms, as Mark Nicholls has argued, the Plot may indeed have demonstrated the 'considerable efficiency at the administrative heart of Stuart England' (3). And yet at the level of symbolic representation, the Plot revealed the terrible fragility of the early modern British state. The emerging British state immediately committed itself to the project of *remembering* the Plot. For four centuries, Britons have commemorated the plot every November 5th. But as the centuries have passed, *what* Britain remembers and *how* it remembers have changed dramatically (Sharpe 83-84). This represents a potentially serious problem for the modern British state. That state is essentially a mechanism for the representation and transmission of political power. As such, its very existence may depend upon its ability to control the representation of such foundational events as the Gunpowder Plot. And yet the modern state has clearly lost that ability. Beneath the reassuring official history of the Plot (treason foiled, state saved), there lurks a secret anarchist history.

This anarchist history is particularly interested in the changing significance of Guy Fawkes. Fawkes was not the leader of the Plot; that was Robert Catesby. But Fawkes has gained notoriety as the 'trigger man' who was meant to detonate the gunpowder. More significantly, the *image* of Fawkes has become a major icon in modern British political culture. The British state initially hoped to maintain a monopoly on representations of Fawkes, and for many years he was dutifully burned in effigy every November 5th. In the nineteenth century, however, the Fawkes image came to signify other things, such as resistance to the emerging disciplinary regime of modern municipal government. Meanwhile the name of Guy Fawkes was undergoing a remarkable mutation. Fawkes himself jettisoned the name Guy in 1603, and went by 'Guido' thereafter (Fraser 90). His decision to detach the signifier 'guy' from the signified (himself) would have momentous consequences, for it would leave his name available for later political use. Indeed, when we consider the subsequent anarchist purposes for which his name and image have been employed, it's tempting to conclude that this symbolic gesture may have been the most *radical* thing that Fawkes ever did. Soon after the Plot was uncovered, the word 'guy' entered the English language, first with a pejorative connotation (a 'bad guy'), and then, as it drifted across the Atlantic, without (Clancy 285). Today in casual American speech we are all 'guys.' ('Hey, guys!' says our four year old daughter when she desires attention from her parents.)



Depending upon the context, 'guy' can signify men, women and even inanimate objects (Clancy 288). The word 'guy' has become a wonderful example of what post-structuralists call a free floating signifier. It signifies – for language cannot help but signify – but it never signifies the same way twice. It is therefore the most dangerous of signifiers – or, from an anarchist point of view, the most interesting.

The visual image of Guy Fawkes's face has gone through a similar mutation. The face of Fawkes thus demonstrates (contrary to the classical structuralist theory outlined by Ferdinand de Saussure) that the symbol can be just as arbitrary as the sign. The face of Fawkes has become a potent free floating symbol. It is thus a potentially powerful instrument for the articulation of postmodern anarchism. Skilfully wielded, it can cut right through the representational structure of the modern state. In the late twentieth century, writers and artists began to recognise the radical potential of the Guy Fawkes image. In 1981, Alan Moore and David Lloyd published their groundbreaking *V for Vendetta*, a politically serious comic book (or, as they were coming to be known then, 'graphic novel'). The hero of this book is an anarchist known only as V, who wages war both symbolic and real against a fictional fascist state. V, who is horribly disfigured, wears a Guy Fawkes mask at all times. In *V for Vendetta*, the image of Fawkes signifies freedom of a distinctively left-libertarian sort. In 2006, James McTeigue directed a film version of *V*; Hollywood's sometimes brilliant Wachowski brothers provided the screenplay. McTeigue and the Wachowskis had already experimented heavily with postmodern anarchism in *The Matrix*; *V* continued and expanded that experiment. The film was widely criticised (not least by Alan Moore) as a betrayal of the original book. Yet how could the film betray a book which was itself simply the latest re-appropriation of a slippery symbol now four centuries old? In fact, the film was much more interesting than its critics realised. In the hands of McTeigue and the Wachowskis, the face of Fawkes realised its full potential. It became a truly nomadic, perpetually mutating postmodern symbol, impossible for the state to nail down. Shifting meanings in every frame, the face demonstrated its ability to destabilise the entire representational order which underwrites state power in the postmodern world.

Thanks to Moore and Lloyd, the face of Fawkes took over newsstands in Britain and the US during the '80s; thanks to the Wachowskis and McTeigue, it took over billboards, cinema screens and televisions in the early twenty-first century. At this point, we must consider the possibility that the face of Fawkes may have ripped a hole in the dominant symbolic order. This event is comparable in form, if not in scope, to the events of May 1968.<sup>1</sup> Inexpensive Fawkes masks are now widely available. They make a striking (if ambiguous) visual statement, while providing their wearers with an anonymity which is increasingly valuable in our surveil-



lance-saturated culture. The face of Fawkes is everywhere now, at peace rallies and anti-nuclear demonstrations. I have seen that face mingled with those of homeless people and recycling environmentalists in downtown Vancouver, British Columbia. And in my modest college town of San Luis Obispo, California, I have seen a group of Guys (probably students) gesturing dramatically at the downtown shopping mall. What does this signify? Perhaps a postmodern critique of consumerism?<sup>2</sup> Yes, for that is how I choose to read it at this moment. Liberated from all permanent meaning, the face of Fawkes stands ready to engage capital and the state in the place where they are weakest, the terrain of representation. Only a nomadic symbol of this kind could possibly keep up with the rampant mutations of post-industrial capitalism. The face of Fawkes is thus a vital instrument for the project of postmodern anarchism.

#### 1605: PREMODERN ANGLO-CATHOLIC ANARCHISM AND THE ORIGINS OF POSTMODERN ANARCHISM

Antonia Fraser has rightly described the historiography of the Gunpowder Plot in terms of 'the continuing battle between Pro-Plotters and No-Plotters' (349). Modern historiography is clearly dominated by the former, who hold that in November 1605, a small group of Catholic radicals led by Robert Catesby attempted to blow up the Houses of Parliament. However, an intriguingly stubborn Catholic counter-history holds that the plot was actually a fiction created by James's chief minister, Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, in order to condemn the Catholics (Levine 192). This counter-history was articulated most famously by John Gerard SJ in 1897. Although the Jesuit interpretation has been refuted many times, James Sharpe is quite right to point out that this 'recurrent counter-history of the Plot ... has never quite gone away' (46). By continuing to wage a stubborn guerrilla campaign against the mainstream historiography,<sup>3</sup> the Catholic counter-story draws our attention to the flexible, malleable symbolic nature of the Plot. The Plot resists fixed interpretations. Its historical details are well established, and yet despite four centuries of historiography, the ultimate meaning of those details remains undetermined (and perhaps indeterminate). The Plot remains a contested symbolic terrain. Although it occurred towards the beginning of the modern period in English political history, the Plot thus contains surprisingly strong postmodern elements. Indeed, the Plot and its numerous representations provide us with a unique opportunity to study the long term articulation of a postmodern symbolic system.

The Plot signifies in some interesting ways. One vital, though frequently overlooked, aspect of the Plot is its anti-Union significance. Guy Fawkes wrote of a 'natural hostility between the English and the Scots,' and claimed that 'it will not be possible to reconcile these two



nations, as they are, for very long' (Fraser 89). King James was determined to pursue his political dream of Anglo-Scottish Union; it was he who proposed that the entire island should be known as Britain (Fraser 103-4). Here we see the first real stirrings of the modern British state. That state would indeed come to know itself as the United Kingdom of Great Britain. Its name and its power would both be based upon its successful manipulation of language and meaning. But before this would be possible, the potentially United Kingdom would have to confront the demands of a revolutionary movement which intended, as Fawkes said, to blow the new rulers back into Scotland (Fraser 209). Although this revolution had been foiled at the level of conventional politics, its linguistic and symbolic impact would be felt for centuries to come. Nowadays we are all Guys, and this is surely politically important.

The figure of Guy Fawkes has power not only at the linguistic level, but also at the level of the symbolic. This becomes especially clear if we consider the intriguing customs which have emerged around the 5th of November. A year after the Plot was discovered, Parliament declared November 5th an annual holiday (3 James I Cap. 1); as this celebration was written into the Anglican prayerbook, it was theoretically compulsory for all subjects until 1859 (Sharpe 79). The 5th was the only national feast to survive in Cromwell's Commonwealth (Fraser 353). On 5 November 1588, the Protestant William of Orange landed in Devon, and delivered Britain from the Catholic regime of James II.

It would seem at this point that the 5th was safe symbolic territory for the forces of Protestant nationalism. Yet in the nineteenth century, the figure of Guy Fawkes was rehabilitated, made into the subject of comic pantomime (Sharpe 118). Commemoration of the Powder Treason morphed into the more secular, less threatening Bonfire Night. Strangely, it was at this precise historical moment that the anarchistic element of the holiday became manifest. In the mid nineteenth century, English towns began to see the danger of social unrest inherent in Bonfire Night. At Guildford in Surrey, members of the 'Guy's Society' began to defy local police and officials, leaving the town 'at the mercy of the "Guys"' (Sharpe 153). The situation was even more striking in 1853; according to a local paper, 'a stranger would have imagined himself in a country disturbed by anarchy and red republicans' (Sharpe 155). As Sharpe has shown, local elites began to withdraw their support for the holiday as they came to associate it with lower class unrest and problems of law and order (Sharpe 163). With the elites abandoning what little control they may once have had over this anarchic holiday, it soon mutated into a generalised secular assault on authority. This assault has frequently taken a left-wing form: in recent years, Bonfire Night has featured burning effigies of Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush (Sharpe 175).

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This interesting assault on the symbols of modern conservative statism reminds us of the hidden history of the 5th of November. In 1605, premodern anarchists attempted to annihilate the nascent British state in order to return England to Catholicism (and presumably leave Scotland to its own devices). The emerging British state quickly rooted out the conspirators, but it could not be done with the conspiracy so quickly. Indeed, the modern British state has defined itself, in important ways, by the oppositional stance which it maintains towards the kind of premodern anarchism embodied by Guy Fawkes. In 1605, Fawkes and his fellows attempted to assassinate not just a king, but the entire apparatus of the early modern British state. The Plot was not merely Catholic but also strongly opposed to the emergence of a strong, centralised United Kingdom of Great Britain. The rehabilitation of Fawkes corresponds to a growing sense of frustration at the perpetual expansion of British state power. Guy Fawkes and Bonfire Night now signify not Catholic terrorism but devolution, local autonomy, working class rejection of Thatcherite social and economic conservatism, and a radical critique of Anglo-American militarism. These are, of course, precisely the values of contemporary British anarchism. Guy Fawkes has thus become an unlikely heroic symbol for the forces of anti-statism today.

### 1981: MODERN AND POSTMODERN ANARCHISMS IN MOORE AND LLOYD'S *V FOR VENDETTA*

'He's become some kind of all-purpose symbol to them, hasn't he?' (Moore and Lloyd, 252). The speaker is Mr Finch, head of the investigative police force in Alan Moore's fictional fascist Britain. Finch is speaking about 'V,' the mysterious protagonist of the 1981 comic book *V for Vendetta*. Through the entire book, V's face remains hidden behind a Guy Fawkes mask. Thus he is indeed an 'all-purpose symbol,' for that's the one thing about the Fawkes image which actually *doesn't* change. Mr Finch is the heir of hapless Victorian police in places like Guildford. Finch is too slow by half: it is only at the end of the narrative that he finally recognises the real threat which V poses. V is dangerous because he is not a person but an idea. More precisely, V is a subversive system of signification. To state the problem in structuralist terms, V is a free floating signifier, the kind which refuses to become permanently attached to any signified. This is especially interesting, since in the classic structuralist model, the linguistic sign, was meant to be arbitrary, but the visual symbol was not. Saussure insisted that with a symbol, 'there is the rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and signified' (68). *V for Vendetta* thus contains a powerful potential poststructuralism; its radical argument is that a symbol can be just as slippery as a sign. V's choice of symbols was espe-



cially clever, for by 1981 the face of Fawkes had almost four centuries of shifting significations behind it. Writer Alan Moore and artist David Lloyd recognised that a symbol can actually become so freighted with multiple meanings that in the end it collapses under its own weight, and escapes meaning altogether. Counter-intuitively, the rudiment of meaning which Saussure found in the symbol can accumulate to a critical point beyond which further meaning is impossible. This point constitutes an event horizon which surrounds the black hole of signification.

Not surprisingly, *V* approaches these themes cautiously, often retreating into more conventional representations of modern anarchism. These representations are politically daring but stylistically safe, and they illustrate for us the boundaries of the possible in 1981. At that moment, comics were just coming into their own. For most of the twentieth century, comic books had been excluded from that privileged canon of works thought to be suitable subjects for literary criticism. The influential American author and critic Samuel Delany has classified comics, along with science fiction and pornography, as 'paraliteratures.'<sup>4</sup> Delany has argued persuasively that the paraliteratures can contribute to our culture in unique and innovative ways, particularly at the level of form. During the 80s, comic writers and artists explored substantial literary themes, often in the framework of extended, multi-issue story arcs which could be collected later on and re-issued as 'graphic novels.' Frank Miller's acclaimed series *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) re-imagined Batman as a vicious thug, and raised ethical questions about his vigilantism. 1986 also saw the publication of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, a tale of believably neurotic superheroes told with an innovative cinematic style.

Comics were not only becoming more serious in the '80s, they were also getting political. Interestingly, both Miller's *Dark Knight* and Moore's *Watchmen* emphasised their late Cold War settings: the threat of US-Soviet nuclear war figures prominently in both narratives. It is important to remember that dystopian pessimism about the near future remained a very prominent feature of Anglo-American popular culture even as Mikhail Gorbachev began to explore the possibility of a thaw in US-Soviet relations. *Watchmen* represented a continuation of the themes that Moore and Lloyd had explored in 1981, when they published *V for Vendetta* in the English magazine *Warrior*. In *V*, Moore employed a plot device that was already becoming recognisable as one of the major political tropes of late Cold War comics: a limited nuclear war between the US and the Soviet Union had ushered in a nuclear winter, and the resulting political chaos had enabled a fascist regime to take power in Britain. *V for Vendetta* appeared not long after the elections of President Ronald Reagan in the US and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in Britain. Political culture in both Britain and the States was increasingly conservative, even reactionary, and



deeply hostile to any sympathetic representation of left-wing politics. Given the state of Anglo-American political culture at the time, it is fairly incredible that Moore and Lloyd could tell their sympathetic tale of a swashbuckling Fawkes-faced anarchist. But sometimes it pays to be paraliterary. As Greg Hoppenstand has argued, comics are the perfect medium for political stories, because they can get away with more: much like Aesop's fables, '*V for Vendetta* was able to blast away at emotionally charged issues also without drawing direct and hostile scrutiny from the government to its moralizing' (521).

*V for Vendetta* offers a clever, insightful look at the rise of fascism. The fascist 'Norsefire' party takes advantage of the power vacuum which occurs as the liberal British state collapses in the aftermath of the nuclear war. 'There wasn't any government any more. Just lots of little gangs, all trying to take over' (28). Of course, this is what the contemporary corporate media often mistake for anarchy: social and political chaos, resulting from the sudden absence of an effective repressive state. But *V* refuses this standard slander. As he prepares to blow up the Old Bailey, V names Anarchy his mistress, and claims that 'she has taught me that justice is meaningless without freedom' (41). There is a strong libertarian theme in *V*, and this is an important part of Moore's late Cold War political critique: Moore finds Soviet-style state communism just as repugnant as the conservative Anglo-American capitalism with which it conspires to destroy the world. V's young protégé Evey soon recognises the source of V's power: 'you can do whatever you want, can't you? I suppose that's conquering the universe' (43).

To their credit, Moore and Lloyd also avoid the easy descent into hedonistic individualism which represents the major danger of this libertarianism. When V tells Evey that 'Do what thou wilt ... shall be the whole of the law,' she resists his second-hand hedonism: 'quoting Aleister Crowley isn't good enough' (217). The comic book continues to interrogate its own libertarian values. As the citizens of fascist Britain heed V's call to revolution, the fascist regime begins to crumble; rioting and disorder ensue. 'All this riot and uproar, V ... is *this* anarchy?' Evey demands. 'Is *this* the land of do-as-you-please?' (195). V informs her that 'anarchy means "without leaders"; not "without order." With anarchy comes an age of ordnung, of true order, which is to say voluntary order.' V is calm, almost didactic. His speech reads like a Kropotkin essay; this is the language of modern left-anarchism. V also repeats Bakunin's famous equation of the creative and destructive urges. V's position is the very essence of modern anarchist praxis: he admires the liberating potential of thoughtful destruction, but he also longs for the day when it might give way to a more peaceful creativity. 'Let us raise a toast to all our bombers, all our bastards,' declares V. 'Let's drink their health ... then meet with



them no more' (222). This point is important enough to warrant repetition: Evey remembers V's words as she makes her own difficult political choices after his death (248). V's final message to London is a rousing call to seize the creative potential inherent in the destruction of existing political forms: 'in anarchy, there is another way. With anarchy, from rubble comes new life, hope re-instated' (258).

Moore's bold anarchist vision was certainly a breath of fresh air for Thatcherite Britain, but his version of anarchism remained mostly modern. *V for Vendetta* retains the fondness for dialectical thinking which can be found in much of the 'scientific' anarchism of the nineteenth century. 'Your pretty empire took so long to build. Now, with a snap of history's fingers ... down it goes' (208). V is history's fingers snapping, and he isn't the only one. A long-suffering female Party member, who has been sexually exploited by high ranking male fascists, plans to assassinate the fascist dictator. 'History's moving my legs and nothing, nothing can stop me,' she thinks (234). *V* reveals the limitations of the dialectical approach. After V's death, Evey comes to understand that he mattered mainly as an idea. She thinks about removing his Guy Fawkes mask to see who he 'really was,' but hesitates: 'if I take off that mask, something will go away forever, be diminished because whoever you are isn't as big as the idea of you' (250). There is something troubling about V's anonymity. It recalls Bakunin's critique of Marxist economic determinism: if history were truly determined by the forces of dialectical materialism, then the political choices and actions of individuals couldn't possibly matter. *V for Vendetta* suggests that after all is said and done, V is not a vibrant, authentic individual shaping history, but an empty, impersonal force: an idea changing history. This suggests a dialectic which is not even Marxist but Hegelian: V is the owl of Minerva, and the dialectic in which he operates is the purely abstract, idealist dialectic of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. It's hard to see much radical potential here.

Luckily, *V* does manage to transcend modern, dialectical thinking in some important ways. The book does flirt with a more innovative post-modern politics. This can be seen most clearly in its treatment of broadcast media. Fascist state television transmits typical racist rubbish, such as the adventures of the futuristic Aryan superhero 'Storm Saxon.' When V interrupts the broadcast, there are predictable protests from the populace: '... pay your bloody licence money for?' (112). (This is perhaps an ironic comment on the fact that British citizens must pay licence fees for the privilege of allowing BBC state television to tell them what they ought to think.) The fascist authorities are terrified by V's ability to seize the means of information: 'We can't broadcast immediately ... but somebody else already is' (186). As the fascists lose control over the media system, their system of political power crumbles with remarkable rapidity.



‘Authoritarian societies are like formation skating,’ V observes, ‘intricate, mechanically precise and above all, precarious’ (197). This recalls Jean Baudrillard’s assertion that the secret of power is that it doesn’t exist (*Fatal Strategies* 80). Indeed, V even invokes Baudrillard’s concept of simulation to describe the nature of power in post-apocalyptic Britain: ‘in a bureaucracy, the file cards *are* reality’ (Moore and Lloyd 218).

The good news here is that if V is right, then the apparently unstoppable monolith of British state power is in fact little more than a precarious house of file cards. If power in the postmodern world is based largely upon illusion and the creative manipulation of reality, then revolutionaries have a clear and effective strategy available to them. They need only seize the engines of simulation, puncture the veil of illusion, and replace the official discourse with a radical alternative narrative. This is precisely V’s strategy. V chooses to commemorate the ‘contribution’ of the ‘great citizen’ Guy Fawkes by destroying Jordan Tower and the old post office, putting the state’s machinery of propaganda and surveillance out of commission (186-7). This is only part of V’s assault on the cybernetic machinery which underwrites contemporary state power. In a fascinating subplot, we learn that the fascist dictator, Adam Susan, is actually a repressed virgin who is in love with the massive Fate computer which monitors the lives of every English subject. ‘He hungers in his secret dreams for the harsh embrace of cruel machines’ (91). One of V’s most significant victories is his ‘seduction’ of the Fate computer (201). In the discourse of the postmodern ‘hacker’ subculture, this might be known as a ‘white hat intrusion’: an unauthorised incursion into a networked system, for socially responsible purposes.

V also promotes postmodern anarchism by consistently and deliberately challenging the concept of the normal individual. As Michel Foucault has shown, this concept is a crucial part of the apparatus by which the modern state retains and enhances its power.<sup>5</sup> V argues that ‘normal’ individuals were largely responsible for the success of fascism. ‘We’ve had a string of embezzlers, frauds, liars and lunatics making a string of catastrophic decisions,’ says V in his pirate television broadcast (116). (He speaks against a backdrop which shows images of Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini.) ‘But who elected them?’ he demands in the next panel. In this panel, David Lloyd presents the standard British ‘nuclear family’: overweight father with a pint of lager in hand, passive mother, two disinterested children, all sat round the telly. ‘It was you!’ declares V. ‘You who appointed these people! You who gave them the power to make your decisions for you!’ (117). The argument reminds us of the Frankfurt School’s interpretation of fascism, particularly as articulated by Erich Fromm in *Fear of Freedom*: we surrender our freedoms to the fascists willingly, even eagerly, because we are terrified by the thought of pure individual freedom. ‘The situation is



under control, and citizens are advised to carry on their business precisely as *normal*,' declares the fascist state, as London descends into looting and rioting (191). Here the fascists are clearly desperate to maintain the appearance of normality, but *V* makes it abundantly clear that 'the normal' is now nothing more than an empty façade. Lloyd makes this argument very effectively in visual terms, with a series of three panels which show the same 'Supersavers' shop front (191). The first panel shows apparently passive 'normal' citizens in front of the shop as fascist shock troops approach. The second panel shows the same citizens as the troops march past. The third panel shows no people at all, just the shop with its windows smashed and its commodities looted.

*V*'s postmodern, anarchistic challenge to 'the normal' becomes most clear in its portrayal of fascist homophobia. One of *V*'s most moving segments is the narrative of Valerie, a lesbian who is imprisoned and tortured by the fascist regime. Valerie tells us that shortly after the fascist takeover 'they started rounding up the gays' (159). 'Why are they so frightened of us?' she demands (159). It is an excellent question. The answer, perhaps, is that gays and lesbians represent a symbolic threat to the fascist system of representation. Gay and lesbian identities and systems of signification stand in direct opposition to the homogenous concept of normality which is such a crucial component of fascism's symbolic regime.

This subversive challenge to the normal also suggests some interesting strategies of resistance. *V* eventually imprisons Evey in a simulation of a fascist prison. (If fascist authority is based upon maintaining the illusion of power, then it becomes possible for others to appropriate that authority by developing illusions of their own. *V*'s decision to do so is, of course, ethically questionable, and this problematises his entire political project in an interesting way.) *V* subjects Evey to months of physical and psychological torture. When she finally discovers the truth about her situation, Evey confronts *V*: 'you say you want to set me free and you put me in a prison ...' (168). *V* replies, 'you were already in a prison. You've been in a prison all your life.' And a little bit later, 'I didn't put you in a prison, Evey. I just showed you the bars' (170). Here *V* develops a radical post-modern argument: the oppressive power of the fascist state (and the modern state more generally) does not lie in the ability of these states to deploy conventional forms of political and economic power. Rather, the truly terrifying power of fascist states (and of all modern states) lies in the ability of these states to enforce a certain perception of the world. The only effective way to challenge fascism, *V* argues, is to attack that perception. This requires the development and articulation of a radical symbolic politics, something dramatic enough to overcome the entire fascist structure of representation. *V* accomplishes this through questionable methods, but in the end Evey comes to understand her experience as transformative and



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liberating. Statist critics will be tempted to dismiss Evey's transformation as a mere manifestation of 'Stockholm syndrome,' but this is too simple. David Lloyd provides the clues in a heavily visual, psychedelic sequence which illustrates Evey's reaction to V's death. Evey finally rejects the dialectic: V may be a big idea, but he still needs to be a person. With trembling hands, Evey begins to unmask him. When she lifts away his 'maddening smile,' the Guy Fawkes grin is replaced by the frightened face of little girl Evey. 'And at last I know,' Evey concludes. 'I know who V must be' (250). The following page is entirely visual, with no text: Alan Moore takes a back seat, to allow Lloyd to make the symbolic argument. Evey slowly makes her way to V's dressing table, gazes at herself in the mirror, and then smiles the Fawkes smile at herself. Evey is not simply in love with V, she is *becoming* V. This is possible (even easy) because V has always been something that anyone can be: just a Guy.

### 2006: TRANSATLANTIC POSTMODERN ANARCHISM IN THE MCTEIGUE/WACHOWSKI *V FOR VENDETTA*

The 2006 film adaptation of *V for Vendetta* has received plenty of critical abuse. Alan Moore was so dismayed with the film's direction that he had his name taken off the project. Among other things, Moore objected to the filmmakers' decision to turn the story into a 'Bush-era parable' (quoted in Xenakis 135). But what else could they do? Although the Wachowskis had been interested in the project since the 80s, it didn't get off the ground until the early 21st century. By then, Moore's modernist cautionary tale about late Cold War politics was no longer relevant. By necessity, the Wachowskis told a new story, one that made sense in the symbolic universe which came into existence after 11 September 2001. Clearly they struck a nerve, particularly on the right. 'If you believe that the entire edifice of the war on terror is built on lies and more lies, then *V for Vendetta* is for you,' thunders John Podhoretz, chief enforcer of the American right. The problem for people like Podhoretz – and it's an increasingly serious problem – is that large numbers of Americans and even larger numbers of non-Americans believe exactly that.

A more serious critique comes from the left wing of science fiction criticism. Citing the work of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Lucius Shepard has argued that the Wachowskis' 1999 film '*The Matrix* pretended a revolutionary stance, but was essentially a highly successful marketing device, the corporate entity affecting a kind of unity with the consumer class, thereby weakening the entire concept of revolution' (122). For Shepard, '*V for Vendetta* may be more of the same' (122). Certainly *V* is a slick, pretty, big budget Hollywood film. But Shepard is too quick to assume that the film therefore has nothing radical to offer. He dismisses



first-time director James McTeigue as a 'thumb-puppet' of the Wachowskis, but in fact McTeigue shows a surprising political sophistication. 'It's politically ambiguous, and the more credit and intelligence you give the audience, the better,' says McTeigue of his film (quoted in Lyall). McTeigue clearly recognised the radical potential inherent in *V*'s subversive, ambiguous system of representation, and this is not really surprising. After all, McTeigue had worked with the Wachowskis as assistant director on *The Matrix*. That film showed a strong interest in postmodern philosophy generally and Baudrillard's theory of simulation in particular. In *V for Vendetta*, McTeigue and the Wachowskis continued to explore that interest, this time in starkly political terms. The result is a striking cinematic argument for postmodern anarchism.

A few critics on the postmodern left have actually recognised the film's radical potential; these critics generally emphasise the film's treatment of sexuality. '*V* is an adventure fantasy that touches the pleasure centers,' argues Richard Goldstein. 'Because it evokes the erotics of resistance, this film is a significant event despite its aesthetic limits.' When the film version of *V* interrogates the intersection of sexuality and politics, it is actually *more* radical than the comic book. Adam B. Vary emphasises that the film was deliberately more provocative and more radical in its portrayal of sexuality than was the comic book. He quotes McTeigue: 'I think in some ways the graphic novel was a victim of its time in how to express homosexuality.' As Vary notes, the filmmakers broadened *V for Vendetta*'s representational horizons by changing the sexual orientation of the Deitrich character from straight to gay.

The film begins by explicitly embracing the post-structuralist possibilities of the Guy Fawkes image, which Moore and Lloyd had already begun to explore in the comic book. We see a brief historical recreation of the Gunpowder Plot. In a voice-over which already suggests what Goldstein has rightly identified as the film's 'erotics of resistance,' Evey (Natalie Portman) provides a useful pocket historiography for the audience: 'I know his name was Guy Fawkes and I know in 1605 he attempted to blow up the Houses of Parliament' (009).<sup>6</sup> Evey already knows more than most people, but never mind. Her voice-over assures us that our cultural inability to remember exactly what we celebrate on the 5th of November is not an insurmountable political obstacle. Indeed, in a postmodern political environment, the fact that Fawkes's face stubbornly and persistently refuses to attach itself to any specific signification may be interpreted positively, as an indication that the Fawkes image can be redeployed for whatever subversive purposes are appropriate to the current historical moment. 'We are told to remember the idea and not the man because a man can fail,' Evey continues. 'He can be caught, he can be killed, and forgotten. But four hundred years later, an idea can still change the world.' The film then identifies the problem inherent in



the dialectical approach to revolution. 'But you cannot kiss an idea,' the disembodied voice of Evey asserts, while on screen the face of Guy is framed in a noose. 'You cannot touch it, or hold it' (010). Remarkably, the film even provides a solution to this problem. It does this by eroticising the idea called V. This rescues V from the dry, dull land of the dialectic. Subsequent events will cause us to re-read a wonderful irony into Evey's critique. By the end of the teaser, the audience understands that some unspecified idea which looks like this Guy is going to change the world. By the end of the film, we may believe that one *can* kiss this idea.

Film is a very effective medium for the kind of visual politics which *V for Vendetta* clearly desires. The film is able to do much more with media, particularly television, than Moore and Lloyd could do. When V seizes control of Jordan Tower to broadcast his message of subversion, a delightful logo appears in the lower right hand corner of every video screen in fascist Britain. It is V's signature symbol (the V inscribed within a circle) followed by the letters TV. The V is, of course, a thinly disguised, inverted anarchy symbol. The addition of 'TV' is a playful postmodern move, which invokes such networks as MTV. Critics on the modernist left will see this as further evidence of the film's alliance with corporate values, but I propose a different reading. V uses a system of symbolic representation which he knows his media-saturated audience will comprehend (and so, for that matter, will the audience of *V for Vendetta*). He does this of necessity, to ensure that there is at least the possibility that his words will be heard. V intends, after all, to deliver a brief introductory lecture on post-structuralist politics, and so it behoves him to begin by giving his audiences something familiar. Sounding rather like Foucault, V declares that 'while the truncheon may be used in lieu of conversation, words will always retain their power' (037). V continues: 'Words offer the means to meaning and for those who will listen, the enunciation of truth' (038). His own choice of words is, of course, significant. If words offer not meaning but the *means* to meaning, that suggests that meaning is something which we construct for ourselves. Similarly, V speaks not of truth but of the *enunciation* of truth, suggesting that truth does not exist prior to the speech act: an extreme structuralism. Towards the end of his speech, V reveals that this structuralism is allied with Nietzsche, and is thus almost certainly Foucauldian. As in the graphic novel, V declares Guy Fawkes a 'great citizen.' But the Wachowskis' V adds these words, which do not appear in Moore's version: 'His hope was to remind the world that fairness, justice and freedom were more than words. They are perspectives' (041). Here V reveals a perspectivist ethics: his post-structuralist rejection of all absolute meaning does not imply a meaningless relativism, but rather a perspectivism which may still evaluate various viewpoints, and endorse those which promote progressive values.



Indeed, *V* seems very concerned to promote ethics in language. The Wachowskis add this to the monologue of Valerie, the victim of fascist homophobia: 'I remember how the meaning of words began to change. How unfamiliar words like "collateral" and "extraordinary rendition" became frightening' (114). Alan Moore has denounced the film for making these references to post-9/11 political culture, but this is how the film remains relevant. Moore's Cold War is over. We are now embroiled in a War on Terror, and this war, even more than that one, is fought on the terrain of language. Nor is that the only war we face. 'I remember how "different" became "dangerous,"' says the Wachowskis' Valerie (115). The film plays up fascism's homophobia much more than the book did. In the film version, different *is* dangerous, for difference (especially the sexual kind) has the potential to undermine the delicate symbolic system within which the fascist order is inscribed. The film makes an important and courageous decision, to portray alternate sexualities as a powerful antidote to the enforced cultural conformity which fascism requires. One is reminded of Deleuze and Guattari's anti-fascist desiring machines. One is also reminded that the writer formerly known as Larry Wachowski is now Laurence, a pre-operative transsexual 'living under the domination of a professional sadist named Mistress Ilsa Strix' (Podhoretz). Podhoretz asserts that *V* 'might have been subversive' if it had been faithful to Laurence's erotic leanings, but as usual, he has it exactly wrong. *V* is subversive, precisely because it *is* faithful to Laurence's new radical sexuality: not in its form, but in its marginality, its Otherness. *V*'s body, like Laurence's, is radically unorthodox. It is this difference which makes *V* dangerous, and this is the difference which Evey loves. The representation of *V* may not be explicitly transgendered, but there is certainly a radical sexual ambiguity about *V*, and this is clearly part of his power.

To this potent post-structural perspectivism, *V* adds a kind of absurdist Situationism. This pushes the film into a fullblown postmodern politics. *V* employs absurdist satire as a way to critique the War on Terror. Deitrich (Stephen Fry) hosts a variety show on the state-run television network. In a particularly hilarious segment, *V* is 'revealed' to be an evil clone of fascist dictator Adam Sutler; several Sutler clones then chase each other around the stage in a bizarre 'Benny Hill' routine, complete with theme music. This is a good place to remember that *V* actually maintains a high level of realism; although set in the near future, it contains no fantastic elements. *V*'s world is very much our world. And so a program like this reminds us of what television *could* do in our world, but *does not* do. In private, Deitrich is even more subversive. In his secret cellar, he keeps a number of forbidden works, including a picture called 'God Save the Queen,' which features the face of Chancellor Sutler transposed onto a portrait of the Queen. McTeigue has said that this painting was inspired by



the graphic design work that Jamie Reid did for the Sex Pistols; McTeigue also mentions Reid's French Situationist influence (Wachowski Brothers and McTeigue 241). References to punk culture and Situationism indicate that the film is also more sophisticated than the book (and again, more radical) in its symbolic political vocabulary. The destruction of Parliament was a curiously minor event in the Moore/Lloyd comic; Goldstein points out that in the film, it becomes an 'enticing image of iconoclastic anarchism [which] recalls the punk values that were central to youth culture until they gave way to patriotic posturing after 9/11.'

In Alan Moore's story, V blew up Parliament at the beginning of the narrative. His big target at the end of the story was 10 Downing Street, because Moore was writing against a particular manifestation of modern state power in the late Cold War. McTeigue and the Wachowskis made the destruction of Parliament the finale of their film, because they were launching a more ambitious postmodern assault upon the symbolic foundations of the modern state. Liberal critics hasten to join conservatives in denouncing this project. *The New Yorker's* David Denby laments the fact that the film ends up 'celebrating an attack against an icon of liberal democracy' and concludes that *V* is an 'allegedly antifascist work' which 'lusts after fire and death.' But the film's point is precisely that Parliament is a symbol as slippery as Guy Fawkes: it can represent the excesses of state power as easily as it can symbolise that convenient abstraction, 'liberal democracy.' In order to secure permission from the relevant officials to film the destruction of Parliament, location supervisor Nick Daubeney 'dwelled on the dangers of the totalitarian state and the fact that this is a restoration of democracy' (quoted in Lyall). Thus the film embraces the flexibility and ambiguity of its symbolism. And *V* manages to maintain a strong sense of ethics through all this ambiguity. Tony Williams is quite right to argue that 'although several commentators have condemned *V* for its supposed support of 9/11 and terrorist bombers, *V* actually blows up buildings which are empty. He also follows Bakunin's anarchist philosophy that an act of destruction can also be creative' (19). *V* is explicit about his symbolic politics. 'The building is a symbol, as is the act of destroying it. Symbols are given power by people. Alone a symbol is meaningless, but with enough people, blowing up a building can change the world' (056). Here the radical post-structuralism of the film is made strikingly manifest. The symbol is defined as radically fluid. Its meaning is infinitely flexible, and that meaning is articulated as the symbol works its way through its cultural environment.

*V* explains all this to Evey; in the very next scene, he goes to assassinate Prothero, the fascist 'Voice of London.' Prothero is watching himself on TV. As *V* approaches, the televised Prothero is telling his audience the 'moral of the story:' 'Good guys win, bad guys lose and as always,



England prevails' (060). Four centuries after the Gunpowder Plot, the British state still struggles to maintain its shaky hold on power by defining different sorts of Guys. In the film, the state loses this struggle, and with it any claim to authority. V invites the citizens of London to don their own Guy Fawkes masks. At the end of the film, what happened to our language happens on screen: everyone becomes a Guy. London is transformed into a city of Guys: a vast sea of enigmatic, smiling Fawkes faces. This is a radical departure from the conclusion of Moore's book, in which Evey lifts the mask from the dead V and decides to carry on his struggle, as a classic libertarian individual in the modernist mould. 'He was all of us,' the film's Evey concludes in a voice-over (168). Williams is right to call this conclusion a considerable improvement over the original (23). Moore's *Bildungsroman* may have been an inspirational story about one woman's journey to political engagement, but the film is something more than that: a postmodern narrative about a subversive political symbolism which can spread through a culture like a virus or meme, rewriting that culture as it goes. The film's emotional climax actually occurs just *before* the destruction of Parliament, when Evey finally kisses V. Here the audience is treated to an inspirational sight: Evey's beautiful lips, caressing the lifeless features of a Guy Fawkes mask. Evey loves the meme. She loves the symbol, its power, and the way V has wielded this power to give Britain a fighting chance for freedom. It's no surprise that liberal critics turn away from this scene in revulsion. 'Sure, Evey tells him he's a monster – and then tries to make out with his mask,' grumbles *Newsweek's* Jeff Giles. 'In a movie, when the pretty girl falls in love with you and stays in love with you, you're a hero.' But what does the pronoun 'you' refer to here? Not a man, surely, but rather a Guy, a guy who gets the girl – then becomes the girl, and finally becomes everyone.

Some critics may argue that the *V for Vendetta* film is unfaithful to the book, while others may wonder if either the film or the book has anything to do with the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. But all of these critics miss the most interesting point. The symbol of Guy Fawkes is important precisely because it is never faithful to itself. It is the grinning face that looks in the mirror and says, with Foucault, 'do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order' (*Archaeology of Knowledge* 17). Anarchists, particularly of the postmodern and post-structuralist sort, should celebrate the existence of this face, this Guy. The face of Fawkes does not offer a specific political message of brief and dubious relevance. Instead, it offers something much more useful: a subversive system of symbolic representation. The work of McTeigue and the Wachowskis, like that of Moore and Lloyd, confirms this system's longstanding anarchist pedigree. The face of Fawkes now stands ready for further deployment in the twenty-first century.

## A IS FOR ANARCHY, V IS FOR VENDETTA

### NOTES

1. Jean Baudrillard, for example, read the events of May as a symbolic insurrection with long-term consequences; in his 1976 book *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, he argued that 'the catastrophic situation opened up by May '68 is not over' (34).
2. This is complicated by the fact that the mask itself has become a consumer commodity, available for USD 6.49 on amazon.com. But if we use consumer markets to acquire the tools we require to critique capitalism, we are only making practical use of the existing instruments in order to transcend the existing order of things – a very anarchist proposition.
3. Francis Edwards SJ presented the Catholic counter-narrative once again in his 1969 book *Guy Fawkes: The Real Story of the Gunpowder Plot?* Father Edwards has continued to develop that narrative in subsequent decades (Levine, 195, note 10).
4. Indeed, for Delany, comic books are at the forefront of the cultural conflict between 'serious literature' and the paraliteratures. Delany argues that the question 'Can comics be art?' prevents 'the serious consideration as art (in the limited, value-bound sense) of *any* texts from any of the paraliterary genres, SF, comics, pornography, mysteries, westerns ...' ('Politics of Paraliterary Criticism,' 236).
5. For example: 'The campaign against drugs is a pretext for the reinforcement of social repression; not only through police raids, but also through the indirect exaltation of the normal, rational, conscientious, and well-adjusted individual' (Foucault, 'Revolutionary Action: "Until Now"' 226).
6. All dialogue quotations are taken from the shooting script which appears in Wachowski Brothers and James McTeigue, *V for Vendetta: From Script to Film*.

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3. See for example the direct action network No Borders <<http://www.noborder.org/>>.
4. May has written extensively on Rancière, and has published a new book entitled *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: creating equality*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.
5. Franks defines these terms in his essay – RK.
6. See Lewis Call, *Postmodern Anarchism*, Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2003.
7. See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: the distribution of the sensible*, trans., Gabriel Rockhill, New York: Continuum, 2004.

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